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To cite this article: Anthony W. Rasmussen (2017) Sales and survival within the contested acoustic territories of Mexico City's Historic Centre, Ethnomusicology Forum, 26:3, 307-330, DOI: [10.1080/17411912.2018.1423574](https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2018.1423574)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2018.1423574>



Published online: 26 Jan 2018.



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# Sales and survival within the contested acoustic territories of Mexico City's Historic Centre

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## ABSTRACT

The diverse and highly stylised cries (*pregones*) of street vendors are ubiquitous features of Mexico City's soundscape and audible manifestations of its cultural heritage. Throughout its history, Mexico City's Historic Centre has served as a site of informal commerce. However, the adoption of neoliberal economic policies and the privatisation of public spaces have produced a paradox. While the number of street vendors rises as options for gainful employment dwindle, the criminalisation of their means of subsistence has exposed these individuals to police bribes, confiscation and harassment. Sounds (e.g., street cries, whistles and coded language) are essential to the maintenance of this tenuous way of life. Sounds are used to lure customers, claim territory and execute highly coordinated evasions of police raids. This article explores the specialised listening and sound-making of street vendors and demonstrates the integral relationship between aurality and subaltern resistance in contemporary Mexico City.

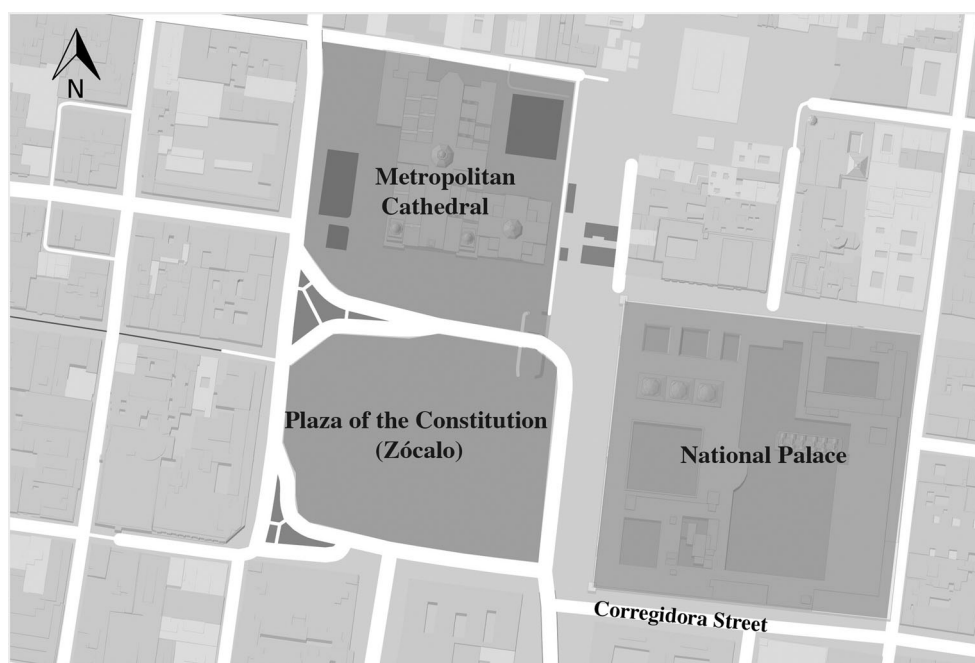
## KEYWORDS

Aurality; gentrification; informal economy; Mexico City; sound studies; street cries

## A raid on Corregidora Street

'El Diablo'<sup>1</sup> sells tasers on Corregidora Street, directly opposite the southern wall of Mexico's National Palace.<sup>2</sup> He is the leader of a *banda* or fictive family of street vendors dubbed toreros/as.<sup>3</sup> Toreros/as or bullfighters are so-called because they 'spend their time dodging the "bull"—the ... inspector who works for the city' (Cross 1998: 99). The occupation of torero/a is defined by defiance: a torero/a works in a place or manner prohibited by the city. Chased, herded or banished, the toreros/as are the remnants of Mexico City's public spaces. The 'volatile stage' of the city sidewalk, metro station or traffic island (Labelle 2010: 87)—spaces experienced by most as venues for only momentary eye contact and brief negotiation with the movements of others—are the bailiwick of the torero/a (see Figure 1).

I first met El Diablo on a winter afternoon in 2016. He and his *banda* were standing in the street with their backs to the palace, using the sidewalk, which rises a metre above street level, as a table top. El Diablo drew an assortment of tasers from a black canvas bag and explained their features to curious passers-by: 'this one hurts, this one kills,



**Figure 1.** Map of Mexico City's Historic Centre with the Zócalo (centre), Metropolitan Cathedral (north), National Palace (west) and Corregidora Street (southwest). Source: Created by the author using Snazzy Maps (CC0 1.0 Universal).

and this one leaves only ashes' (interview, 14 February 2016, Mexico City).<sup>4</sup> El Diablo's hyperbole was greeted with nervous laughter from the choir of onlookers that surrounded him. A teenage boy in his school uniform, encouraged by his giggling friends, selected the model with the highest voltage and the deal was struck.

As the sales continue, I chatted with El Diablo about his life and work. He is a man in his early 50s with a wiry build, wind-burnt skin, a silvery pointed moustache and a penetrating stare. He has a penchant for bandanas and leather vests and looks a bit like 'Quint', the sea captain from Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*. He explained that at an early age he learned that the *pregón* or stylised sales pitch is more than a form of advertisement; it is a type of seduction. He elaborated:

You can't put on your battle face to promote your merchandise. You promote merchandise with a smoother, sweeter voice: 'What can we get for you, my love? *Pásale, mi carnal* [come, my brother]. Try out whatever you like, it's no problem'. [As a torero/a], you must make the people feel comfortable or they won't come. (Interview, 14 February 2016, Mexico City)

**Video 1.** Toreros/as using *pregones* to attract customers in the streets adjacent to the Zócalo. Created by the author. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.5671753.v1>

I observed that El Diablo had three dramatically different modes of speech with distinct tones. When he spoke to me directly his volume dropped. His normal speaking voice was dry like the sound of tearing butcher paper, and laced with the sing-song melody and euphemistic wordplay of Mexico City *caló* or slang. His phrases tended to trail off into silence, implying that you, the listener, know what I mean. His sales voice was altogether

something different. It was penetrating and nasal like the upper register of a bassoon. He spoke with supersonic wit, poetic flourishes and dashes of dark humour that teased, cornered and engaged potential clients. He pivoted between these two modes of speech rapidly, spying potential clients out of the corner of his eye, addressing them and then returning to me once they had passed.

He pivoted into his third mode of speech so quickly that it took me a moment to register the situation which had provoked it. El Diablo formed his lower lip into a U-shape and produced a short, melodic whistle that was so loud and so close to my head I could feel the air pressure fluctuate in my ears. El Diablo was answered by a cascade of whistles from the other toreros/as; the waves of sound rolled along the sidewalk to the end of the block. The municipal police<sup>5</sup> had arrived in a pick-up truck and seven officers in body armour were shuffling out of the back. They seemed to be in no particular hurry. The toreros/as, on the other hand, were already on the move—each forming a sack from the square cloth upon which their merchandise was displayed, slinging the load over their shoulders and dashing out of sight. El Diablo grabbed a two-way radio from his vest pocket and barked at an unseen torero/a on the other end: ‘Get up, let’s go! Get up, let’s go! Hold on, I’m coming! Six-three of your 15 to my 15, put the shot up! I apply my five and they mark me, R10 R10!’ (interview, 14 February 2016, Mexico City).<sup>6</sup> His *banda* dispersed and, determining that his responsibilities were momentarily fulfilled, El Diablo leaned against the cold basalt wall and sighed: ‘It’s like this every day. The police aren’t trained to care for the public. All they know how to do is grab toreros/as’ (interview, 14 February 2016, Mexico City).

**Audio 1.** A raid of Corregidora Street conducted by the Auxiliary Police of the Secretary of Public Security on February 14, 2016. Recorded by the author. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.5671381.v1>

## Battling the bull

There is no ‘typical’ torero/a. Indeed, the more toreros/as I spoke with, the more I encountered different political ideologies, values and personal objectives. According to sociologist John C. Cross,

street vendors do not appear to be substantially different from the bulk of the Mexican population ... Most vendors are in their productive ages ... showing that street vending is not a ‘refuge’ of the young or old who are otherwise unemployable. (1998: 89–90)

Many toreros/as learned their trade or inherited their materials or selling territory from their family. Some have been selling on the same patch of cement for most of their lives. Others, like artisanal craft vendor ‘Pepe’, hold university degrees, but have chosen street vending to meet both financial and ideological needs. Says Pepe, vending ‘offered an alternative economic option to my academic career but also a way to put what I was learning into practice, to participate in and support artisanal work, not industrial work’ (interview, 26 July 2015, Mexico City).

Since Mexico’s debt-fuelled economic crisis beginning in 1982, women of all ages have played ever more integral roles in the informal economy (Cantú Chapa 2005: 61–2). However, due to entrenched, gendered labour divisions, many female vendors retain child-rearing and domestic responsibilities in addition to the time-consuming and

physically demanding work of street vending. While limiting their mobility and ability to recover from confiscation and theft, and increasing their dependence on often patriarchal merchant organisations, these factors do not preclude women from assuming positions of power in these same organisations (Lezama 1991: 672–3).

Sofía Trejo, for example, ex-torera and current political director of United Vendors in Motion (Unión de Marchantes en Movimiento, A.C.),<sup>7</sup> is perhaps uniquely qualified to elaborate on the significance of aurality in Mexico City life. She spent much of her adolescence and young adulthood selling piñatas and teaching herself how to issue her *pregón* with ‘a singular joy’. She now uses her voice to calm, uplift and occasionally mobilise the toreros/as she represents. Trejo explains that many *capitalenos* (Mexico City natives) draw a connection between *pregones* and culture because ‘these sounds hint at our roots, where we come from’. She says that the influence of the tonal, indigenous languages of Mexico endures in a number of expressions and pronunciations, and what she calls ‘speaking with music in your voice’ which she believes distinguishes *capitaleno* accents from others (interview, 31 May 2016, Mexico City).

Toreros/as like Trejo and El Diablo frequently portray their trade (and, by proxy, themselves) as part of an unbroken tradition that preceded the Spanish conquest and the *pregón* as a traditional practice with its roots in *barrio* (neighbourhood) culture, and by extension the rural village. In effect, they see these places, the urban *barrio* and the rural village, as sanctuaries of ‘authentic’ Mexican culture, places where foreign influences have failed to penetrate completely. Thus, many toreros/as believe that they carry this unsullied Mexicaness (*mexicanidad*)<sup>8</sup> with them through their work. This symbolic tether between vocal expression and historical imaginary is the crux of the toreros/as’ claim to their right to the city—‘the refusal to allow oneself to be removed from urban reality by a discriminatory and segregative organisation’ (Lefebvre 1996: 195).

Increased rural–urban migration has swelled the ranks of toreros/as and there are many for whom street vending is the only option. Yet the phenomenological reality of their work—the need to vocalise, to listen, to read the streets, to face the elements, to live and breathe under almost constant scrutiny and threat—does promote a certain swagger. El Diablo sees himself and his fellow toreros/as as ‘working people. We are rock-n-rollers, we are *desmadrosos* [undisciplined], alcoholics or drug addicts, but workers. We always look for a way to *sacar algo para la papa* [bring home the bacon]’ (interview, 3 April 2016, Mexico City) (see Figure 2).

The toreros/as must face the same challenges as other street vendors—acquiring merchandise, protecting against theft, finding and enticing costumers, building bonds with fellow vendors to ensure mutual gain, protecting themselves and their goods from the elements, finding a place to go to the bathroom and having a friend to guard their goods while they do so. But on top of all this, toreros/as must be constantly poised to either fight or flee. In order to survive, toreros/as must acquire ‘socio-cultural tools that allow them to successfully manage their position’ (Olivo Pérez 2010: 16). This includes an incredibly complex blend of sensory and social sophistication. They must be able to see the police, plain-clothed infiltrators, rival vendors and thieves at a great distance. They must hear changes in the volume and composition of crowds, distinguish voices and signals within crowd noise, understand and converse using whistles and spoken code in order to confound the police, and code-switch between *barrio*-specific *caló* of toreros/as and Castilian Spanish. Personal safety and the ability to feed themselves and



**Figure 2.** A torero displays his merchandise from a tarpaulin that can be cinched with ropes for a quick getaway. Source: Photograph by María Magdalena Alonso Pérez. Used by permission.

their families depend on their ability to deploy this multisensory knowledge almost instantly. '[T]his affective hermeneutic dance', says ethnomusicologist J. Martin Daughtry, 'is simultaneously the product and the source of experience: to listen is to live, and to know how to listen is a skill that is developed through living' (2015: 101).

### Introduction and article organisation

Informal commerce permeates many public spaces in Mexico City. Hundreds of thousands of individuals work as informal vendors, and this labour force is expanding (Barbosa Cruz 2008; Aguiar 2009). Street vending in Mexico City takes on numerous forms affording vendors options about how, when and where to work. Vendors may work outside of the Historic Centre where police raids are less frequent. They may set up shop in weekly *tianguises* (bazaars) or permanent markets such as Lagunilla, Tepito and Merced. From the cement-block sprawl of the poorest neighbourhoods that



extends to the city's volcanic rim, to the verdant parks of its most exclusive districts, 'the underground economy overflows the sidewalks ... Around the traffic lights, street vendors flood the client with offers of Kleenex, kitchen utensils, toys, juggling. In such an extreme, simple defencelessness becomes artistic' (Monsiváis 1995: 17). The existence of this massive, unregulated sector of the economy is made possible through inconsistent police enforcement, ambiguous legal codes and, says Cross, 'irregular agreements [between street vendors and] city officials [that have transformed] vast areas of the city into outdoor markets' (1998: 17) (see Figure 3).

To date, the limited research conducted on toreros/as and Mexico City's informal economy in general has largely been the province of sociologists who focus on the socio-economic conditions that have produced this vast network of unregulated labour. For example, the works of Cross and Miguel Ángel Olivo Pérez demonstrate the complexity and political agency of informal vendor organisations in Mexico City. Sociologist Diane E. Davis' research on urban identity politics is helpful in contextualising the daily police raids suffered by toreros/as within the larger processes of gentrification in the Historic Centre. Such research is valuable in tracking the broad patterns of informal commerce, but for the most part does not address how these individuals grapple with the challenges they face on a daily basis, nor the personal and cultural forces they draw upon to maintain this lifestyle in the face of powerful opposition. Auditory perception and engagement are significant factors in explaining the endurance of the torero/a. Sound in this context is more than a means of communication and emotional expression. Sound is a weapon.



**Figure 3.** Sidewalks surrounding the San Hipólito Temple are transformed into an outdoor market. Source: Photograph by the author.

For both toreros/as and police, it is often applied tactically to warn, stun, torment, mislead and seduce the listener.

This investigation concerns ontological and epistemological battles over Mexico City's public sphere<sup>9</sup>—the continual processes of struggle, acquiescence and negotiation between multiple, unequal powers. It is the public sphere, ethnomusicologist Ana María Ochoa Gautier posits, that 'is increasingly mediated by the aural [and] is being redefined to include forms of participation which are not channelled by the forms of debate or participation historically recognised as such by the official polity' (2006: 807). In this article, I examine the socio-political forces that have been aligned against toreros/as and consider the role of sound in meeting and surpassing these forces. To this end, I will present the various sounds and listening strategies that toreros/as employ to conduct their business, compete with other vendors and avoid confiscation and arrest, and frame these within broader historical and cultural modes of informational and symbolic communication. I adapt Daughtry's (2015: 77–92) zones of (in)audition—a spatio-temporal mapping of auditory anticipation, engagement and trauma set in wartime Iraq—to the quotidian violence of contemporary Mexico City. I do so by situating these discourses on sound and conflict within the socio-political context of contemporary Mexico City in which, says anthropologist Néstor García Canclini, 'power is won and renewed through centres that are disseminated, initiatives that are multipolar, [and] actions and messages that are adapted to [a] variety of addressees and cultural references' (2001: 142). Finally, I will discuss the steps that the city government has taken to curb the sonorous practices of toreros/as (and, by proxy, the toreros/as themselves) and evaluate the consequences in relation to anthropologist James Scott's overt and covert forms of resistance.

The testimonials of current and former street vendors, gathered between August 2014 and September 2016, constitute the primary material of this investigation. These contributors include women and men, some in their late teens to those well beyond retirement age,<sup>10</sup> and represent the respective occupations of torero/a, market and *tianguis* vendor, as well as independent vendor. Because of the legal ambiguity, pressures and time constraints of their trade, plus the fact that most were not accustomed to being interviewed, I found that vendors frequently demurred or responded suspiciously to requests for 'cold' interviews (i.e., ones in which the interviewee and I had not been introduced through a mutual acquaintance). Those who were open to such interviews tended to be men between 30 and 50 years old, who held leadership roles in these merchant organisations (e.g., El Diablo). In order to reach beyond this verbose minority, it became necessary to establish some basis of trust beforehand. Family connections and social networks were essential to this end. Sofía Trejo, for example, was extremely welcoming once we had been introduced by my colleague who happens to be the daughter of one of Trejo's long-time friends. Because the informal economy is an integral part of daily life in Mexico City, such connections were never far removed.

### Streetwise auditors

The lifestyle of the torero/a requires making countless, calculated risks each day. This risk assessment is dependent on a specialised form of sensory awareness that is curiously



applicable to Daughtry's zones of (in)audition. Discussing the listening practices of soldiers and civilians in wartime Iraq, Daughtry distinguishes four conceptual zones that roughly correspond to spatial distances: the audible inaudible, 'a ... space that housed sounds so distant and/ or ubiquitous that they ceased to draw the attention of the experienced auditor' (2015: 77–8); the narrational zone, 'the story of an unseen battle unfolding before one's ears' (2015: 80); the tactical zone, in which 'listeners trained their skills of echolocation to determine the proximity of explosions, the trajectory of bullets, and the locations of shooters' (2015: 88); and the trauma zone, where the force of an acoustic event temporarily supersedes its audibility (2015: 92). Despite the difference between whizzing bullets in an Iraqi war zone and vocalisations in the colonial streets of Mexico City, Daughtry's zones of (in)audition are valuable in understanding some of the mechanics of the auditory sophistication of the toreros/as.

Mexico City's Historic Centre is an objectively loud place. On an average day one can hear the roar of revving cars and trucks choking the cobblestone streets; the piatti-cymbal splash of reggaeton, banda and electronic dance music as they are spewed from oversized PA systems; the colossal fanfare of bells from the Metropolitan Cathedral that are absorbed and filtered by the massive bass trap of the Zócalo; as well as the hundreds of toreros/as launching their reedy, plaintive *pregones*. This ubiquitous acoustic foundation—routinely reaching decibel levels at or above 120 dB—represents the audible inaudible. Within this acoustic goulash, toreros/as must not only compete using their own, unamplified voices, but must also extract the voices and whistles of friends and foes, note changes in the composition of crowd noise and scan for signals of ever-impending raids. Here, the toreros/as are listening to the narrational zone: if a police raid, scuffle between rival toreros/as or other disturbance is occurring blocks away, toreros/as can follow the unseen action. When the action comes into view (a spatial range that is rather limited by narrow streets, high walls and sharp corners) the analogy between war and informal commerce becomes illuminating by contrast. In the toreros/as' tactical zone, experienced auditors use their eyes, ears and voice. No longer passive listeners, the toreros/as engage in a discursive dance with the individuals who pass through their territory. Unlike a soldier gauging the type and proximity of incoming fire and acting accordingly, the tactical zone of the torero/a is normally a social one. The experienced torero/a evaluates the manner of dress, body language, accent, phenotype, age and gender of everyone who passes. What *barrio* are you from? Are you a lost tourist? Are you a serious customer or just going for a stroll? Are you a police inspector or a thief? In the tactical zone, the toreros/as deploy their *pregones*. Here, the torero/a warns, teases, charms and intimidates a host of actors depending on lightning-fast assessment.

The trauma zone—in which a sound is so massive that it can only be felt—is less applicable to the experiences of toreros/as but it does occur. The toreros/as use only their voices that, while often well-trained and powerful, are normally unamplified because of the high premium on mobility. Traumatic sounds are the purview of the Mexican state. For example, the brassy pop of tear-gas canisters is used routinely in crowd-dispersal manoeuvres and precedes violent confrontation like swelling thunderheads before a deluge. At closer range, however, within 20 m, the concussive force compresses the chest cavity and drives one back well before the gas can reach one's nose and eyes.

El Diablo elaborates on tactical use of sound by the police:

The sirens [of police vehicles] indicate power, they tell you that power is coming. The sound of beating shields is intimidating. When they hit their shields with their batons then you have a sound of repression directed at the people so that they know that power is here and you can either calm yourself or *te pongo en tu madre* [get your ass kicked]. (Interview, 3 April 2016, Mexico City)

These traumatic sounds are not limited to conventional weapons. For example, in anticipation of the first visit of Pope Francis I in 2016, the government locked down the Zócalo and erected a massive concert stage and sound system. Perhaps only ‘testing’ the sound system, event organisers pumped caustic electronic dance music into the narrow streets where many of the toreros/as work. During this sound check, the music was amplified at such a volume that I remember feeling the robotic bass-pulse rise up from the cobblestones from my feet to my viscera like a human tuning fork. The music was so intense that it drowned out the *pregones* of the toreros/as and drove the shoppers away. Perhaps only a coincidence, this sound test initiated a two-day period in which a complete prohibition of street vending activities was issued and aggressively enforced.

### Fixity as status

While the types of informal vendors, their selling strategies and their inventories are too numerous to mention here, they can best be categorised—for the sake of understanding their social status as well as the conditions under which they labour—by their degree of fixity. For example, there are those who rent stalls in the specialised, permanent markets such as Merced (fruits, vegetables, meats, grains), Jamaica (flowers), Sonora (medicinal herbs, religious talismans, pets and livestock, animal products) and Tepito (pirated electronics, clothing, contraband and illegal items such as handguns and endangered sea turtle eggs). Throughout the city’s history, the police have periodically corralled street vendors into these fixed markets. As the city’s population swelled and market demand increased, vendors repeatedly sought better opportunities beyond the confines of the market, seeking out consumers rather than waiting to be found. The enlargement and construction of new markets have often coincided with periods of severe repression of street vending. They continue to represent a container for street vendors through which city officials can easily observe, extract revenue and ‘cement support among a section of the “popular” classes’ (Cross 1998: 88) by offering preferential treatment in exchange for political co-option (i.e., promising allegiance to a particular political party).<sup>11</sup>

The true street vendors of Mexico City’s informal economy are those who walk, stand, squat, pedal and push their wares along the bustling streets. While many, but not all, of Mexico City’s street vendors rely on sound as their primary means of advertisement — from their own voices, to recorded voices and music, to mechanical sounds—the more mobile the vendor, the more sonorous he or she must be. Vendors without a fixed location (or without a consistent inventory) must be able to announce their presence as well as the type and quality of their merchandise to any customer within earshot. Human rights lawyer and ex-street vendor José Luis Gutiérrez Román explains that while legislation does exist that is explicitly directed towards noise abatement (e.g., traffic horns, noise within hospitals, airplane noise, etc.), ‘there is no law that specifically regulates the sound or the behaviour of [street] vendors’ (interview, 24 October 2015, Mexico City).

Nevertheless, the sounds of the street vendors garner inordinate attention from the police. During the visit of Francis I, for example, toreros/as were warned by police officers that they would only be allowed to remain in the Historic Centre on the condition that they work in silence.<sup>12</sup>

In order to maintain a fixed location, a vendor must, in some way or another, purchase the luxury of that permanence by affiliating with a collective, paying rent or bribes, or exchanging favours with property owners, government officials or the police (Barbosa Cruz 2008; Cross 1998; Olivo Pérez 2010). Street vendors bypass many of the structures in place to extract revenue and, consequently, pay little or nothing. Yet truly independent street vendors are exceedingly rare. Without protection or political leverage, independent vendors are left out in the cold—vulnerable to criminal predation, hostile competitors and the police. One such example is the *camotero/a*, a type of street vendor who sells *camote* [sweet potato] and plantain deserts from a portable coal-fire oven and releases steam as a form of sonic advertisement. *Camotero* ‘Francisco’ explains: ‘I don’t belong to any group. I work on my own and if I ever have a problem because I’m working alone, I have to *rascar con mis uñas* [scratch with my nails/ fight with my bare hands]’ (interview, 6 June 2015, Mexico City).

Independent female street vendors are even more vulnerable. Speaking to vendors in the open-air markets of Andean cities, anthropologist Mary Weismantel explains that ‘[t]he market woman is [considered] an indecent figure who arouses rumours of sexual anomaly’. The markets themselves—the territories that these women dominate—‘violate a cultural order in which the public sphere is masculine, while feminine realms are enclosed and hidden away from the intrusive eyes of strangers’ (2001: 47). Within the context of Mexico City, sociologist Patricia Gaytán Sánchez (2004: 92) suggests that this ‘public woman’—one who works in the streets as a vendor, police officer, prostitute or in any capacity legal or otherwise—disturbs a gender construct that lies at the base of Mexican culture (see also Wilson 1991: 8). According to this vision, women are caregivers and homemakers. Their presence in the hurly-burly of street life disturbs this construct. Consequently, female street vendors who work without the protection of a merchant collective often work in fear. Independent street vendor ‘Laura’ explains that her fears of harassment and assault define the territory in which she is willing to work:

For others, it would be easier to roam elsewhere, but not for me. My parents don’t give me permission because it is dangerous and they are afraid that something might happen to me. As a woman, I can’t defend myself. Sometimes I have to put up with men saying things to me but I don’t listen to them and I don’t return their glances. (Interview, 5 May 2015, Mexico City)

Toreros/as, on the other hand, normally incorporate a *banda* headed by an *aguador* [leader]<sup>13</sup> who is responsible for negotiating with the police and city inspectors. The ability to pool resources, share storage space, watch over children in the temporary absence of a guardian and to have an experienced representative who can negotiate with police and government officials gives the toreros/as—otherwise the most marginalised segment of the informal economy in Mexico City—a degree of political power. Cross argues that ‘by operating *collectively*, informal economic actors acquire new interest structures that allow them to manipulate the zero-sum trade-off between evasion and harassment’ (1998: 35–6; original emphasis).

Yet the choice to incorporate is not without risks. Competition is commonplace between these *bandas* and is often fuelled by conflicting political affiliations between rival groups. Leaders may use their influence with particular government officials to sway police enforcement in their own favour and thereby displace or disrupt the business of their rivals. Further, torero/a *bandas* and independent vendors work in direct competition with the established, brick-and-mortar shops that line the streets near the Zócalo. Torero 'Zeta' believes that he and his group have just as much right to work in the Historic Centre as the shopkeepers, having devoted most of their lives to working in the same small area. Yet he acknowledges that many shopkeepers resent the toreros because they must pay rent and the toreros do not. Nevertheless, this competition and mutual resentment does not preclude a degree of cooperation. During several police raids, I witnessed toreros quickly pack up their merchandise, slinging it over their shoulders, and dumping the load on the floor of a nearby shop. Across the threshold of the shop door, the merchandise can no longer be declared contraband by the police and therefore cannot be confiscated.

### Patronage and patriarchy

The structure of torero/a *bandas* often mirrors Mexican cultural conceptions of the extended family, with men assuming the role of protector and women that of caregiver (Barbosa Cruz 2008; Lezama 1991; Olivo Pérez 2010). As women are drawn into the public sphere by opportunity or the pressures of necessity, 'men and the state continue their attempts to confine them to the private sphere or to the safety of certain zones' (Wilson 1991: 16). Thus, these torero/a *bandas* serve to simultaneously protect and cloister women. As a result, I found toreras often unwilling to speak with me whereas independent female vendors much more accessible. With few exceptions, each time I (a male stranger) approached a torera for an interview, one or more male guardians interjected. Men provide a defensive wall to the outside world; with the exception of customers with whom the toreras must deal, men negotiate and defend against the police, city inspectors, competitors, criminals and others who would exploit the perceived vulnerability of these women. In an ironic twist, these women, with thunderous *pregones* equal to their male counterparts, who struggle and pass the hours on the same ancient cobblestone streets, have traded their 'voices' for the security that these informal organisations provide.

Many toreras are mothers or guardians of young children. Either single or with working partners, these women must manage a double shift, working an average of 10 hours a day with their children at their side and then returning home at night to perform domestic duties. During vending hours, these women must lure clients, haggle and watch for the police all while caring for and educating their children. During a raid, they must face the nightmare of carrying their merchandise and their infant (if they have one), and guiding their little ones to safety. More than any other informal merchant, these mothers and caregivers are at a distinct disadvantage in terms of their ability to earn revenue and elude the authorities, and as a result are extremely dependent on the cooperative structure of torero/a *bandas* such as El Diablo's (Lezama 1991: 672–3) (see Figure 4).

I met Sofia Trejo in her organisation's headquarters, a walk-up cluster of offices sandwiched between plumbing supply shops. I arrived just as a meeting was ending. Half-eaten



**Figure 4.** Toreras selling artisanal textiles and gourds. Source: Photograph by María Magdalena Alonso Pérez. Used by permission.

pastries populated a conference table and the odour of Nescafé hung in the air like a canopy. During a lull in what would turn out to be a long and fascinating conversation, I asked Trejo whether she could speak on the experiences of toreras who must care for children while they work. ‘It’s horrible!’ she exclaimed, ‘something you will often hear during a raid is “Where did I put my child?! Where is my baby?!”’ (interview, 31 May 2016, Mexico City). Trejo is a seasoned orator: she commands without appearing to condescend; her thoughts seem to emerge pre-assembled, and during our talk she repeatedly anticipated my questions. Yet as we discussed the panic of the raids her steady voice betrayed a sliver of pain. ‘This happened to me too’, she said:

The city inspectors found me. The police came to seize my *nieves*<sup>14</sup> cart. This was during a big raid in the 1990s. Before the raid began, I took my nine-month-old daughter and placed her in an apple box so that the police wouldn’t be able to find her. This happened many times to me and it’s something that toreros/as have had to do for years because if their babies were discovered, they would be given to the DIF (National System for the Integral Development of the Family). (Interview, 31 May 2016, Mexico City)

### Impudent voices ... uncooperative ears

On a long taxi ride across the city at rush hour, I struck up a conversation with my driver, ‘Marco’, about the variety of accents I had noticed in the city. Serendipitously, this turned out to be one of Marco’s favourite topics of discussion. Many of the *barrios* in Mexico City, said Marco, are known for their distinct manners of speech and the more ‘working class’ the area, the more ‘musical’ the speech becomes. I asked Marco what he meant by ‘musical’. It is not so much that people use different words or expressions in specific neighbourhoods, he explained, but that the emphasis, roughness and tonal qualities of the words are different. He pointed to my Californian accent as an extreme example of a flat, ‘non-



musical' manner of speech. I tried not to take this personally. 'Barrio speech', as Marco labels it, in contrast to formal Mexican Spanish, is filled with melodic peaks and valleys; it is relatively nasal, with guttural sounds somewhat like vocal fry, and phrase structures that often conclude with a slight melodic lift.

Marco proceeded to give me an auditory sampler of some of these ways of speaking by repeating the same phrase each time with a different inflection: 'This is Iztapalapa, this is Tepito, this is my *barrio*, Doctores, this is *fresa* [the way upper class young people are thought to speak]. For *fresa*, you have to speak like you have a potato in your mouth' (interview, 15 May 2015, Mexico City). Do these extremely localised ways of speaking serve some purpose for the speaker? For Gutiérrez Román, it is a type of code: 'I can speak to you in *caló* and you will not understand. That happens in all societies' (interview, 22 February 2016, Mexico City). Social worker and Mexico City native Laura Vargas suggests that the prevalence of coded speech among Mexico City's marginalised communities is a reflection of a colonial legacy: '[If] you're forced to speak Spanish then you're forced to reveal everything. But, perhaps because it's not your native manner of expression, there are different modes of expression that can be combined with Spanish. It's a very intra-community way of keeping safe' (interview, 11 February 2016, Mexico City).

Beyond the *barrio*-specific sounds of spoken *caló*, the imbrication of humour, insult, sexual innuendo, tactical obscurity and double meaning is highly characteristic of localised forms of communication throughout Mexico City. The way that toreros/as listen and communicate is a direct outgrowth of the playfulness and secrecy characteristic of Mexico City *caló*. This in turn is fed by several discursive tributaries with profound roots in Mexican culture: *piropo*, a poetic monologue meant to ingratiate or woo another; *albur*, humoristic, pseudo-sexual word battles; the aforementioned *pregón*; and the *chiflido* (or *silbido*), a whistle that may either be a tonal signal or a melodic representation of a Spanish word or phrase.

### Pregones

For toreros/as, the *pregón* is their primary form of advertisement. Froilán Martínez, a clothing vendor from Nezahualcóyotl,<sup>15</sup> confirms: 'The *pregón* is very important. You have to walk around yelling all the time because if you don't, the client won't come' (interview, 8 April 2015, Mexico City). The *pregón* is formulaic. In its most basic form, it assumes a nasal tone that distinguishes it from normal speech. It is rhythmically metred, repetitive and normally features a cadential *portamento*<sup>16</sup> up or down. The *pregón* may be customised to each potential customer who passes. A seasoned *pregonero/a* (a person who issues *pregones*) will make the most of the natural qualities of his or her voice to personalise the *pregón*. Working within the aesthetic expectations of a piercing, nasal tone, *pregoneros/as* might distinguish their calls from the calls of others by operating in a distinct vocal range, or if they are naturally endowed with a gravelly tone they may choose to emphasise that.

**Audio 2.** A typical *pregón*. Recorded by the author. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.5671708.v1>

**Audio 3.** A *pregonero* cutting through the 'sonic fog' with his distinctive voice. Recorded by the author. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.5671717.v1>

The expression of identity within a fixed structure is key to the success of the *pregonero/a*. In a setting where dozens of individuals may be producing *pregones*, the successful *pregonero/a* is one who can cut through the sonic fog—not only successfully conveying information to the consumer, but distinguishing his or her voice to such a degree that they are remembered by the consumer and sought out in the future. Gutiérrez Román confirms:

[The *pregón*] is fundamental because it is your own label and because the *pregón* defines the clientele. For example, I remember when I used to sell tacos a man told me, 'here we have to shout in this way'. After that, I imitated his *pregones* and that became the foundation of my success in that job. Making sounds and being persistent are important things because they give identity to your business and because that's how you gain clients. (Interview, 24 October 2015, Mexico City)

Olivo Pérez agrees, stating that the *pregón* 'may be endowed with a halo of its own cultural attraction that tens of thousands of shoppers can identify' (2010: 163).

### *Piropos*

*Piropos* can range from simple compliments, 'Your eyes are so beautiful', to direct expressions of romantic interest, 'Napoleon conquered nations with his sword; you conquer hearts with your eyes' (interview, Elizabeth Hernández, 18 April 2016, Mexico City). As a part of his *pregón*, Froilán adapts the *piropo* to entice potential customers: 'Come here, *güerita*.<sup>17</sup> Beautiful women don't pay here. This dress would look very good on you. With this blouse you will conquer your king'. He says, 'We don't do this with the intention of offending but we know how to sell the merchandise'. He adds that, in his practice, men receive similar treatment: 'Come here master, which would you like? Get up king, no obligation. Check it out, boss'. Froilán believes that the tone of his voice is fundamental in making his customers 'feel good'. What is important is not necessarily what one says but how one says it and he speculates that if one were to work 'in silence or fail to respect women, things just wouldn't work out and you could get yourself in trouble' (interview, 8 April 2015, Mexico City). Indeed, the 'way' and the situation in which *piropos* are delivered seem to make an enormous difference in how they are understood. Many of my interlocutors, self-described victims of *acoso callejero* [sexual harassment in public], mention that the catcalls they receive are often reminiscent of the *pregones* that they might hear from a street vendor. Ice-cream shop owner 'Ysidora' explains that she has been called *güerita* numerous times in both markets and on the street. It is not the word itself, she explains, but the tone, the elongation of the first syllable, the breathiness and the proximity of the speaker that allow her to distinguish a potentially threatening situation from a normal part of the commercial soundscape (interview, 17 February 2016, Mexico City).

**Audio 4.** A man shouts *piropos* ('Little girl! Beautiful!') at a dancer during a carnival in Tláhuac, Mexico City. Recorded by the author. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.5671723.v1>

### *Albures*

While *piropos* and *albures* are both meant to demonstrate verbal and perceptive virtuosity, the *albur* is not a monologue but a conversation. According to historian Elena Deanda-Camacho, 'the *albur* is a joke with sexual connotations that establishes two codes (the

overt meaning and the implicit) and while the overt meaning may not have any sexual reference, in the reception one must contemplate both in order to understand each reference' (2010: 165). Participants of *albur* seek to position their opponent in a (symbolically) sexually submissive position and the one who cannot answer is metaphorically 'conquered'. As with *piropos*, the context and the relationship of the participants of *albur* define its purpose. Anthropologist and Mexico City native Elizabeth Hernández explains, '*albures* tend to be more rude and offensive between people who don't know each other well. But it is also a common practice between friends and family members to tease each other or to communicate secretly while in mixed company' (interview, 18 April 2016, Mexico City).

In addition to being a form of verbal competition, *albures* are often highly masculinised, clandestine practices. They are normally performed between men, and are, at least intended for a male audience. However, this is not always the case and a number of female interlocutors confirm that while they do not participate in *albur* duels, they understand them. In fact, Lourdes Ruiz, known as the 'Queen of the *Albur*', won her title during Mexico City's annual Albur Tournament in 1997 and has successfully defended her title every year since. A clothing vendor for the Tepito market, Ruiz was enrolled in the tournament by her brothers and showed up on a whim. She recalls that the tournament began with a competition between men and women, and that these *albures* presented imagery of market life (e.g., 'descriptions of our stalls, the size of our merchandise, the types of poles we raise and how we pull our canvas over them') to mask descriptions of the speakers' sexual organs and prowess. According to Ruiz, 'the *albur* is a game of verbal chess. It requires mental agility and utilises both hemispheres of the brain' (interview, 1 August 2016, Mexico City).

In her case, it is a skill that she learned in the street and honed in the market. Ruiz first encountered *albures*

in the *barrio*. The kids who sold *nieves* on the corner would talk and laugh amongst themselves. I asked them why they were laughing and they wouldn't explain. Over time, little by little, they would teach me and when I began to understand I said to myself, 'Now I am truly from *here*!' (Interview, 1 August 2016, Mexico City)

Ruiz suggests that the *albur* tradition and street vending influence each other reciprocally, but she also raises an important distinction. 'For it to be a real *albur*', she explains, 'you always need an accomplice'. That is, a feature of the *albur*, whether a formal duel or a playful street transaction, is that everyone involved must be willing participants. She adds, 'At the moment that one invades the space of another and chooses to utter a *piropo* or *albur* without the acceptance of the other, this is called violence' (interview, 1 August 2016, Mexico City).

Likewise, some street vendors deploy *pregones* that are not meant to compliment but rather to tease, confuse or rush the potential customer into a quick sale or a sloppy negotiation. Like the *albur*, these *pregones* are inherently competitive (the vendor is trying to outwit the customer) and often rely on sexual innuendo and humour to get customers to drop their guard. Olivio Pérez notes that the *pregones* of street vendors normally adhere to certain conventions. Specifically, they tend to contain information about product type and quality, and attempt to break social barriers through compliments and personalisation. However, the particular conditions in which certain vendors work

as well as the pressures of their ambiguous legal status occasionally push them towards other approaches. For example, some vendors coordinate their *pregones* in order to produce ‘an anxiety-inducing style of calling and hand clapping meant to obfuscate and/or enervate the client, who has no time to think about his or her purchase. [Others] terrorise through a relatively subtle threat to do some sort of harm to the client in case the transaction fails’ (Olivo Pérez 2010: 101–2).

**Audio 5.** Food vendors in Mexico City’s Jamaica Market produce a din of ‘anxiety-inducing’ *pregones* meant to pressure clients into visiting their stalls. Recorded by the author. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.5671726.v1>

## Chiflidos

In contemporary Mexico City, *chiflidos*<sup>18</sup> or whistles may take the form of simple signals meant to announce the presence of an individual, family or clique, or to warn against danger. They may be used to startle, confound and mock unwelcome intruders, demonstrating a form of sonorous, territorial defence. Among some indigenous communities of rural Mexico, such as the Chinanteco people of Oaxaca’s Sierra Juárez, *chiflidos* have evolved to mimic the melody and rhythm of spoken words producing what linguist Juan Hasler calls a ‘whistle language’ (2005: 21). This enables experienced whistlers to conduct full conversations—exclusively in *chiflidos*—at great distances and in a form incomprehensible to the uninitiated.

Among the toreros/as of Mexico City, the practice of substituting spoken phrases with *chiflidos* also exists but, rather than encompassing a nearly complete language, it survives as a shrinking repertoire of key phrases. *Chiflidos* are used by toreros/as in tandem with the aforementioned *pregones* and two-way radios. Radios can transmit further than a *chiflido* but *chiflidos* can be produced almost instantaneously, by any of the toreros/as (only leaders carry radios), and are harder for the police to intercept. Olivo Pérez posits that ‘one cannot stress enough the importance of *chiflidos* as socio-cultural artefacts that allow street vendors to coordinate diverse collective actions’ (2010: 161).

**Audio 6.** A whistle meant to represent the Spanish phrase, ‘¡Sales o me voy!’ [‘Hurry up or I’m leaving!’]. Performed by Ángel González. Recorded by the author. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.5671732.v1>

Population movement and a growing reliance on communication technology have produced a generation gap between those who once relied on *chiflidos* as a practical form of communication and younger individuals who, if they whistle at all, can understand and reproduce only a skeletal vocabulary. As a result, El Diablo has had to simplify his *chiflidos* in order to communicate with the younger generations who fill his ranks. At present, El Diablo explains that he is able to use only several *chiflidos* that his understudies can understand: ‘[There is] the *chiflido* to get up, and this *chiflido* is to get up *en chinga* [quickly]. This *chiflido* is to return to work and this is for my warriors to attack’ (interview, 3 April 2016, Mexico City). El Diablo explains that everybody, including the police, now know these basic *chiflidos*. In order to advance in this sonic arms race, the toreros/as

have taken to coding their radio transmissions as well. El Diablo explains the code designed to confuse the police:

The codes are different and what we do is label the streets, that is, we identify them by different numbers, not in numerical order. Our territory is on Corregidora Street, from the Supreme Court at Catellanos Alley to Burger King. We mark all of Corregidora street as [##],<sup>19</sup> we mark Castellanos Alley as [##], and we mark Venustiano Carranza as [##]. Because of that, the police don't know who is signalling or where they are signalling from. For that reason, they say, 'No way, dude ... [##], [##], [##]? What's going on with these assholes?!' (Interview, 3 April 2016, Mexico City)

The streets in the Historic Centre are not numbered, so the designation of numbers to streets does not correspond with any city planning scheme. It is not clear whether the numeric system designed by the toreros/as is based on some formula or is completely random. However, the overall effect is that by coding language concerning location (be it the location of a group of toreros/as, of police officers or of suspicious individuals), the toreros/as are able to coordinate their movements across the entire area before the police can respond. Thus, the radio has assumed many of the functions that *chiflidos* once served and has extended the possibilities of communication, misdirection and resistance.

**Audio 7.** El Diablo's whistle commanding his *banda* to 'Get up!' (i.e., 'Be Alert!'). Recorded by the author. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.5671741.v1>

**Audio 8.** El Diablo's whistle commanding his *banda* to either 'Spread out!' or 'Fight!' depending on the situation. This whistle represents the Spanish phrase, '*¡Al ataque, mis guerreros!*' ['To the attack, my warriors!']. Recorded by the author. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.5671744.v1>

## The Giuliani plan

Several earnest attempts were made to permanently remove street vending from the Historic Centre during the twentieth century and most recently in the mid-2000s. In 2002, a plan was formulated to expel the criminal element—which included the toreros/as—from the Historic Centre once and for all. A cabal of Mexican business leaders and city officials contracted the security firm of Giuliani Partners LLC, founded by the former New York City mayor (1994–2001) and republican presidential candidate (2008) Rudy Giuliani, to 'rescue' the Historic Centre. The plan was to be based on Broken Windows—a programme implemented by Giuliani in New York City and characterised by heavy surveillance, brutal police enforcement and rigid sentencing practices (Arroyo 2003; Davis 2007).<sup>20</sup> With a price tag of roughly \$4.3 million, the plan for the Historic Centre included the installation of sophisticated surveillance equipment as well as the conscription of a 'new, quasi-private police ... called the Citizen Protection Unit [with] an organisation separate from the rest of the police, and a different uniform, a higher salary and specific responsibility to guard against crime and street life using new technology' (Davis 2007: 661–2).

By casting their net widely, lumping toreros/as and other informal vendors in with drug dealers and violent criminals, the city government hoped to accomplish something that they had been working towards for over 40 years—a clean, exclusive, tourist-friendly commercial zone where all the relics of Mexican folkloric and pre-Columbian culture could be displayed safely behind museum glass and where the poor would remain unseen and



unheard. While widely criticised by human rights advocates, journalists and city police organisations that the plan usurped and implicitly criticised, the plan received heavy support from real-estate developers and the tourism industry who recognised the money-making potential in the gentrification of the Historic Centre (Arroyo 2003; Davis 2007).

War between the State and street vendors is nothing new in Mexico City's Historic Centre. However, the adoption of Rudy Giuliani's model of public security marked an ambitious, tactical shift. Before 2002, the methods of police enforcement were both violent and inconsistent, characterised by 'the forced removal [and] relocation of street vendors to markets built expressly for them [as well as] outright brutality' (Davis 2007: 660). If the Giuliani plan reached fruition, there would be no need to remind citizens of their place in the social hierarchy through demonstrations of force; social control would become a self-regulatory process as individuals would pass through sterile, neatly delineated public spaces in which they never know when they are being watched or listened to.

The objectives of the Giuliani plan are reminiscent of philosopher Michel Foucault's interpretation of the panopticon: a metaphorical model for the 'automatic functioning of power' (Foucault [1977] 1995: 201) based upon philosopher Jeremy Bentham's circular, architectural structure in which individuals are isolated in cells and observed from a central tower (Bentham 1843: 40). This impersonal system of social control is reliant on the belief (on the part of surveilled subject) of continuous, impending punishment and is therefore much more insidious than the direct threat of violence (Foucault [1977] 1995: 201).<sup>21</sup> This belief 'enables the disciplinary power to be both absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert ... and absolutely "discreet," for it functions permanently and largely in silence' (Foucault [1977] 1995: 177). The rifle cracks and police sirens of the forced removals of street vendors would be replaced, according to this vision, with the delicate buzz of security cameras and the sonic shadow of plain-clothed police infiltrators as they move silently through crowds of shouting toreros/as. The police would not need to intimidate through sound but only listen and observe, capturing the faces of torero/a leaders and protest organisers with hidden cameras and recording their intercepted radio messages. The ability to listen, both selectively and intently, is a critical survival tool of the toreros/as but it is also a tool of their oppression. Says economist Jacques Attali: 'Everywhere, power reduces the noise made by others and adds sound prevention to its arsenal. Listening becomes an essential means of surveillance and social control' (1985: 122). When surveillance is deemed insufficient to maintain order (e.g., in preparation for visiting dignitaries), sound 'extends the scope of panoptic possibility' not only in being heard 'but in hearing an authoritarian presence' (Rice 2003: 8).<sup>22</sup>

## Silver instead of lead

The success of the Giuliani plan depended on the coordination of interdependent parts: laws to regulate behaviour and the use of space, efficient courts to penalise, technology to document criminal behaviour and identify perpetrators, corporate sponsors to fund technology and supplement the pay of government employees, and a special police that due to their higher pay and advanced training would be incorruptible. Most importantly, the plan depended on cementing the belief of its own perfection in the imagination of the public. In fact, the Giuliani plan has achieved none of its overt objectives and succeeded

only in punishing some of Mexico City's most marginalised inhabitants by interfering with sales, confiscating merchandise and doing bodily harm. According to political scientist Mario Arroyo, 'during more than seventy years of authoritarianism ... the overriding objective [of the police] has been to provide security not for the citizens but for the regime, hence the poor planning of the police [and] the lack of interest in themes such as professionalism, accountability, etc.' (2003: 11–12).

The implementation of the Giuliani plan did not include removing the rot of corruption from the city government but simply imposed an additional layer of surveillance and enforcement. The addition of special police only inspired rancour among police regulars and gave the *toreros/as* and other informal vendors a new actor with whom to fight, negotiate and avoid. These byzantine, conflicting agencies have inspired uncertainty, among both civilians and the agents themselves, about who is responsible for patrolling the Historic Centre. Arroyo adds that 'corruption is a key factor that explains the deviation of the police forces. ... Police officials work under a "secret code" in order to move up, maintain their positions, or work in specific locations' (2003: 10). Police officers rely on informal and criminal activity as an opportunity to demand bribes and confiscate goods without repercussions. They then use this income, according to Arroyo, to bribe their superiors for the right to work as well as for preferential working conditions. These superiors then, in turn, bribe their superiors. In this network of corruption, 'money flows from the base of the pyramid upwards and this [revenue] is the product of the extortion carried out by the police on both citizens and presumed criminals' (Arroyo 2003: 10).

Corruption and brutality represent a duality with which the police deal with any civilians who drift into the margins of legality. Gutiérrez Román explains that '[a]uthority may turn a blind eye, as if they don't see anything and allow the vendors to sell without permission at the cost of a fee. If the fee is not paid, that's when the soldiers and police begin to detain and harass the vendors' (interview, 24 October 2015, Mexico City). *Toreros/as*, like the police themselves, must always judge their own position of strength in comparison to that of their opponent: should I pay? Should I run? Should I fight? Consequently, bribery is a tool of both the police and the informal vendor and, says Olivo Pérez, '[b]ribery is the point that locks diverse actors in a transactional circle of a political and economic nature as well as making possible the broad consolidation of street vending [and] is the agreement that allows the vendors to persevere more comfortably, extensively, and lucratively in their activities' (2010: 115). Further, being a police officer in Mexico City is:

risky business. All the more so because of the poor organisation of police. Though current figures do not exist, it is estimated that eighty police officers die each year in Mexico City, representing one death every five days. ... The police prefer not to enforce the law and the prevailing context of corruption means that they would prefer to receive *plata en lugar de plomo* [silver instead of lead]. (Arroyo 2003: 8–9)

The addition of the Citizen Protection Unit has only inspired resentment and competition within the police ranks (Arroyo 2003; Davis 2007). Consequently, *toreros/as* 'have been able to take advantage of structural weaknesses in the political and administrative apparatus of the Mexican state to defend their interests in occupying public space' (Cross 1998: 229–30).

## Conclusion

In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, anthropologist James Scott (1987) examines forms of resistance practiced by oppressed populations towards their oppressors. In contrast to armed rebellion, these covert forms of resistance often favour self-interest over cooperation and ‘typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms’ (1987: 29). Are the gruff *pregones*, *chiflidos* and coded language of the toreros/as ‘weapons of the weak’ or, much like the threatening din of the baton-beating police, sounds that precede the blow? Scott’s work is valuable to this investigation because, to a degree, it mirrors my interest in adapting the sonic attributes of outright war to forms of quotidian conflict. However, I argue that Scott’s model does not encompass the multipolar power structures of contemporary Mexico City.

Torero/a *bandas* demonstrate a degree of internal organisation and planning that, in many cases, out-pace the poorly organised and under-motivated police. Toreros/as, simply out of practical necessity, must not only work for the material gain of their immediate group but also compromise and collaborate with other *bandas* as well as a broad network of shop owners and suppliers. Toreros/as deploy coded radio communiqués and *chiflidos* to confound the police and communicate with unseen allies. Finally, the toreros/as are masters of risk assessment—they choose their battles carefully but conduct their work in full defiance of civic authority, often steps away from the National Palace and other symbolic sites of state power.

Toreros/as may often be driven by tremendous economic necessity but also by entitlement; many believe that the Historic Centre belongs to them and that their trade constitutes an important public service. These cobblestone streets are more than places of business for the torero/a:

[They] draw upon the valour of the space as a symbol, as cultural patrimony not of a particular social group, but a territory for everyone [and this] allows the generic reunion and reconciliation of the Mexican people, beneath the dimension of the sacred, in order to give social legitimacy to their own professional interests. (Lezama 1991: 660–1)

Beneath the drive for survival and providing for their families, the behaviour of the toreros/as reflects ‘expressions ... of resistance, and only in gradation of more developed consciousness, ... expressions of class struggle’ (Olivo Pérez 2010: 132). When left with no other recourse, toreros/as, relying on strength in numbers, physically confront and sometimes come to blows with the police and government agents. Thus, while not engaged in outright revolt, toreros/as display ‘a level of energy and aggression [that n]either the inspectors, nor agents, nor police ... are capable of matching’ (Olivo Pérez 2010: 169). The toreros/as complicate Scott’s binary of overt and covert forms of resistance, and, opines anthropologist Matthew Gutmann, ‘at least in Latin America today and historically, these forms occur together, alternate, and transform themselves into each other’ (1993: 77).

But why is direct confrontation worth the risk for toreros/as? El Diablo believes that

what happens is that one’s needs are much stronger than the fear of the government’s blows. I would prefer fifty lashes than my children going without food. I prefer to face the blows of the police rather than leave my girlfriend without food. I need to bring income to my house in whatever form I can as long as it’s done honourably. (Interview, 3 April 2016, Mexico City)

Toreros/as have proven to be too adaptable and powerful, and the State too weak. The hearing and sounding body, the primary tool and weapon of the torero/a, has ruptured the panoptic ear and held the street.

## Notes

1. Names first introduced in single quotation marks represent pseudonyms for interlocutors who wish to remain anonymous.
2. Mexico City's Historic Centre (including the Plaza of the Constitution or Zócalo, the National Palace, the Metropolitan Cathedral and adjoining streets) assumes dual roles. It is at once the great meeting point and symbolic heart of the nation and at the same time a space of struggle, violence and rupture, 'where a web of human relations, mediated by changing interests and purposes, [coalesce] around some objective reality of a common world' (Ramírez Kuri 2010: 44).
3. In Spanish, gender neutrality is designated with a masculine noun indicating an exclusively male group or one of mixed gender (e.g., *los mexicanos* [the Mexicans]). In order to emphasise the growing participation of women in Mexico City's informal economy, I use 'torero/a' (singular) and 'toreros/as' (plural) throughout when referring to these vendors in general.
4. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
5. Auxiliary Police of the Secretary of Public Security (SSP).
6. Toreros/as assume that their radio comunicués are intercepted by the police and, for this reason, label particular locations with numbers and other code words based on a formula that is both confidential and regularly changed.
7. Trejo's organisation lobbies for regulatory reform, promotes the causes of street vendors to the general public and organises protests.
8. The term, one that can be heard frequently on the streets of Mexico City, involves the evaluation of something or someone in terms of adherence to an intangible, highly idiosyncratic essence of being Mexican. Thus, while it is a binary concept (Mexican/not Mexican), it is of a kind that, as anthropologist Michael Herzfeld suggests, often 'obscure[s] complex processes of creative co-optation in economic, political, and administrative practices' (1997: 3).
9. Sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1993: 30–1) conceives of the public sphere as a bridge between the State and society, one that coincided with the rise of the bourgeoisie in eighteenth-century Europe. Ochoa Gautier (2006) describes the public sphere of contemporary Latin America as one in a state of expansion in terms of access and participation. I use 'public sphere' to connote Ochoa Gautier's usage.
10. Upon reaching the age of 60, individuals may obtain a credential issued by the National Institute for Elderly People (INAPAM) that attests to their senior status. This is an important credential for toreros/as because it serves as a de facto exemption from arrest during police raids although it may not protect from confiscation or demands for *mordida* (bribes; literally, 'a bite').
11. Sofia Trejo explains that many informal vendor *bandas* preserve their selling territory and discourage police raids through co-option (i.e., by affiliating themselves with one of Mexico's major political parties such as El PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party]). She adds that by affiliating with one party, a particular group may raise the ire of another group affiliated with the opposition or invite harassment by partisan city inspectors.
12. I had the opportunity to witness this phenomenon during the visit of Francis I; some toreros/as transformed their *pregones* into sharp whispers directed towards potential clients. According to both El Diablo and Trejo, the police routinely silence toreros/as during the visits of foreign dignitaries.
13. In our discussions, El Diablo was uncomfortable with the title 'leader' and instead referred to himself as both a *halcón* [hawk] and *aguador* [lookout], both meaning roughly the same thing. The latter is a play on the common expression '*aguas!*' ['waters!']. This expression

is used to warn someone of danger and harkens back to an age when people cleaned their chamber pots by tossing the contents out the window.

14. Flavoured ice.
15. A municipality of the state of Mexico immediately across Mexico City's eastern border.
16. A continuous slide between pitches.
17. *Güero/a* (diminutive: *güerito/a*) literally refers to a light-skinned person but is often used as a broad signifier of beauty. As a legacy of European colonisation during which time a rigid caste system was enforced, such everyday expressions betray a strong epistemological correlation between phenotype, beauty and social status.
18. In Mexico, a whistle (i.e., a high-pitched tone produced by the mouth, lips, and tongue) may be called either *chiflido* or *silbido* (not to be confused with *silbato*, a mechanical whistle).
19. I have omitted the numbers that El Diablo assigned to streets in order to protect the secrecy of the *toreros/as*' code.
20. 'Broken Windows' was first coined by criminologist George Kelling and political scientist James Q. Wilson in the article 'Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety', published in *The Atlantic* in 1982. It reported on a policing experiment called the 'Safe and Clean Neighborhoods Program' conducted in Newark, New Jersey in the mid-1970s (Kelling and Coles 1997).
21. Bentham considers the 'most important point' of the panopticon to be 'that the persons to be inspected should always feel themselves as if under inspection, at least as standing a great chance of being so' (1843: 44).
22. Anthropologist Tom Rice (2003: 8–9) uses *panaudicon* to describe 'an acoustics of power', and in doing so distinguishes between Orwellian surveillance and the active infiltration of the ear through which the listener 'becomes the bearer of a receptive ear of power' (see also Atkinson 2007: 1908).

## Acknowledgements

The completion of this article has truly been a community effort and I must give credit to the people of Mexico City who, through their countless acts of generosity, made all this possible. I am especially grateful for the guidance of Cuauhtémoc Alcántara, Jacqueline Ávila, Elizabeth Hernández, Oswaldo Mejía, Karla Ponce and Julie K. Wesp. I must also express my gratitude to René T. A. Lysloff, Jonathan Ritter, Leonora Saavedra and Deborah Wong for their priceless mentorship.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States (UC MEXUS) under the UC MEXUS Dissertation Research Grant; the University of California, Riverside Graduate Division under the Graduate Research Mentorship Fellowship; and the University of California, Riverside Department of Music under the Manolito Romero Memorial Award.

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